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## AN UNUSUAL COURSE IN COMPOSITION

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If the teaching of Freshman rhetoric in American colleges and universities may properly be said to be in a state of transition and experimentation, then the teaching of advanced rhetoric can be characterized as in a condition only little short of chaotic. It is generally admitted that college students other than Freshmen do need instruction in how to use the English language, but just what the nature of such advanced composition courses should be is a problem that has not yet met with any entirely satisfactory solution. In many institutions advanced composition courses have consisted of "essay writing," "the short-story," "the forensic," "journalism." The general trend at present seems to be more and more toward "expository writing," but if there are any broad, fundamental principles that should govern the teaching of advanced, non-technical courses, they are not in evidence. Each teacher of advanced rhetoric is to a large extent blazing out a path for himself—and sometimes the path is both narrow and purposeless.

Unless some genius arises and points out at a single stroke the most effective way to teach students how to use their mother tongue, this desired end can be reached only by slow and halting experiment, only by a careful comparison and correlation of the methods attempted in hundreds of classrooms during a long period of time. For this reason the following brief account of a somewhat unusual procedure, carried on in a college which I shall not mention, may be of value.

The particular course in which we conducted our experiments was Rhetoric 3, advanced composition, required of all Sophomores. At the first meeting of the English department in the fall, the head of the department announced that from a careful survey of many Sophomore classes he was convinced that they contained a very

small percentage of Addisons, Ruskins, and Stevensons. Accordingly he had decided that for one year at least the department should cease attempting to teach Sophomores to imitate writers of the classical school. The course for that year, he said, was to be essentially practical; it must teach the students, just as far as possible, the kind of writing that they would be most likely to do after leaving college. Incidentally, he hoped that the course in itself could be made interesting.

I do not mean to say that these objects were wholly or to any noteworthy extent accomplished; but after we once got started we did arouse more interest than we had ever aroused before, and we believe that we taught something really useful.

Getting started was the great difficulty. We were so tied down to textbooks, to classical models, and to precedent that we could scarcely see beyond the limits of the classroom. The first ray of light came to us at a faculty meeting. When the president announced that he was writing a report which he believed would give the alumni a comprehensive view of the work of the college and impress upon them very forcefully the need of a greater endowment, the junior member of the department had an inspiration: Why not let the students in Rhetoric 3 work up such a report?

That is just what we did. The Sophomores took hold of the work eagerly. Committees appointed by the students secured alumni reports from other institutions, and laid them before the class sections for examination, criticism, and, to some extent, imitation. Other committees interviewed the various college officers and secured the necessary statistics concerning enrolment, income, expenditures, and such matters. Still other committees contributed information and ideas about the activities and possibilities of all the departments of the college. This material—and there was an enormous quantity of it—was freely discussed in class, and every student was encouraged to have an opinion of his own regarding the worth of each idea, provided only that it was based on reason.

After throwing away the matter that was indisputably irrelevant or unimportant, we took up the question of arrangement. Here, too, were many differences of opinion, but we did without difficulty

discover that certain methods of arrangement were coherent, while other methods were illogical. In fact, unity, coherence, proportion, and emphasis were all applied, though we did not always mention these principles by name.

Finally, after each step had been discussed thoroughly and a careful outline of the whole work had been constructed, came the writing of the finished report. The students were at this point keyed up to do their best work by the knowledge that the ten reports which seemed most satisfactory to the department would be turned over to the president for examination. It may be interesting to know that the president praised these ten reports highly and made use of one of them after changing only three statements.

The influence exerted on the class by this piece of composition was great. Each man felt that he had been doing something worth while, something not purely academic. He could see the usefulness of the task and realize that it was practical. He was writing because he had ideas to express, and he had an object in expressing them well. He did not feel that he was merely juggling with words; he was weighing ideas in the light of his best judgment and expressing them so that they would appeal to the men whose names appeared in the alumni directory. English composition had actually become interesting.

Our second innovation was an outgrowth of the first. The printing and circulation of the alumni report created in the students a desire to see their work in print. "Now that we have aroused their interest we must hold it," the head announced emphatically. "If the hope of getting their writing into print will serve as a stimulus, then our duty is obvious."

Yes, our duty was plain enough, but for a long time nothing else was plain. What could the boys write that any editor would publish? Local items about athletic and social affairs would not do for two reasons: such work would afford little practice in composition, and in addition the reportorial field was already covered.

For several weeks we groped in the dark, but at length we discovered that many papers in the large towns and small cities were willing to publish, each week, one-column articles of an educational or semi-scientific nature. These papers wanted nothing from

us commonly called college news—nothing about football scores, or class scraps, or rah-rah celebrations. They were eager, however, for popular expositions of such matters as agricultural and engineering experiments, scientific management as applied to the farm and the workshop, discoveries of all sorts, methods for preventing accidents, and new and improved methods for doing all kinds of work.

Since many of the students in this college were enrolled in technical courses, they had little difficulty in obtaining material for compositions of this kind; in fact, they most frequently wrote about some subject that they had already investigated in other classes. Several of the subjects used by the students in the agricultural course were "How to Prune Fruit Trees," "Balanced Rations for Dairy Herds," "The Work of the County Agent." One student in the engineering course discussed the relative merits of dust preventives; he had himself seen the four strips of road fronting the campus treated respectively with tar, emulsion, oil, and water, and he showed in his article which method was the cheapest and which the most satisfactory. Some very successful subjects used by students in the classical course, the material for which they had derived largely from their collateral reading in literature, history, economics, and allied subjects, were "Methods of Finding Lost Heirs," "The Origin of Proper Names," "The Settlement of ——— County," "Interesting Facts about the State Constitution," Three typical subjects chosen by students in the mining course were "Miners' Superstitions," "The Relation between Dust and Explosions in Mines," and "Safety Lamps."

One Sophomore who was, strictly speaking, taking no course at all unless it was the athletic course, presented a problem which seemed unsolvable until he at length suggested that he might be able to treat the football situation in the state in much the same manner that Christie Mathewson's popular articles were treating baseball; his aim, he said, would be not to write news, but to discuss the methods of the various coaches, captains, and graduate managers, compare present systems with former ones, call attention to celebrated players both past and present, and inject a plentiful spice of anecdote about all concerned. He was told to go ahead,

and much to everyone's surprise his writing was from a pecuniary point of view the most successful newspaper work done that year. Yes, many of our articles were actually sold, some at the rate of a dollar a column.

The taste of money, even in small amounts, was very agreeable, and Rhetoric 3, instead of being one of the most hated courses in college, soon became one of the most popular. The students themselves began to offer suggestions for work that they thought would sell. We tried advertisements, editorials for the metropolitan dailies, jokes, funny stories, and feature articles for Sunday supplements. Not all that was written was published—far from it—but enough got into print to keep the students interested and to urge them on to do their best work.

Many subjects came up in a most unexpected manner. One day the humorist of the Sophomore class announced that he had received replies in answer to an advertisement offering sermons and religious addresses for sale. At first the department was inclined to be indignant, but when several serious-minded workers in the Y.M.C.A. indicated their eagerness to fill this demand, they were given permission. As a result, eleven addresses were written, and six of them were sold on terms satisfactory to the writers. It is needless to say that the names of the purchasers were kept a carefully guarded secret.

Another subject of more than passing interest was suggested by the Anti-Cigarette Society. This organization was offering the students of all the colleges in the state a money prize for the best essay of a thousand words dealing with the evils of cigarette smoking. According to the law of opposites so noticeable in colleges, this subject appealed especially to the habitual users of tobacco. In fact, the most notorious "cigarette fiend" of the class did the best piece of work. A short time before, a tobacco company had given a motorcycle to the student who had been voted the most popular man in the college, the votes being cigarette coupons. The "fiend" of whom I have spoken constructed his essay around this incident. He called attention to the number of votes cast and the number of cigarettes they represented. He emphasized his statement by estimating how many years it would have taken the

winner of the motorcycle to smoke all these cigarettes by himself, and how many men would be required to smoke such an enormous number in a single day. Then he announced the results of a few laboratory experiments that he had performed. Among other things he estimated the amount of nicotine the cigarettes contained, and, after discussing the virulence of nicotine as a poison, showed how many men this amount would have killed outright if it had been administered in larger doses—and so on to the extent of a thousand words. Evidently this composition was considered to be of some worth, for it received the prize.

The largest single piece of work that we attempted came to us through an instructor in civil engineering. He had been surveying house lots in the outskirts of the city where a new residence district, known as the Sunshine Extension, was being laid out, and he suggested that the English department write the prospectus which the company intended to distribute. The idea attracted both department and students. Although the president of the company was skeptical as to our ability to satisfy him, he readily promised to give us all the data required, and in addition he agreed to pay us a modest sum for our work if by any chance it should please him.

We handled this matter in much the same way that we had previously handled the alumni report. First, models were secured and criticized; then the students, who were for the most part prospective engineers, or farmers, or architects, or landscape gardeners, visited the ground and examined its possibilities. They looked for desirable features—and they found them. I'll guarantee that the promoters themselves never dreamed of half the good points about Sunshine Extension until they read the prospectus that we submitted to them. At any rate they accepted our work and professed to be satisfied with it.

The prospectus brought the course to a close. From the standpoint of the teacher the semester's work had been difficult but satisfying. It had been difficult because many types of composition had been taught, and each kind had first to be studied and then explained to the class without the aid of a textbook. Moreover, the task of criticism had been enormous; practically every piece

of writing that was published had to be corrected and rewritten time and again. Had not the classes been small and the scheduled hours of the instructors few, this kind of teaching would have been impossible. Also, since manuscripts must always be sent to a publisher in typewritten form, the department stenographer had been indispensable. The work had been satisfying because each instructor felt that he was actually teaching more about English composition than he had ever taught before.

The objection may be raised that all this was not literary work. Certainly it was not. Nor had the compositions of previous years been literary work. The fact is that writing with a literary flavor is very, very seldom produced in Sophomore classes. There was nothing about the course, however, to clip the wings of genius; there was no letting down of the bars to admit slangy diction or slipshod expression. Perfection of form and detail was sought as diligently as ever.

The main point is that the course was practical. It taught the student something about the kind of writing that he is likely to wish to do after graduation. It encouraged him, crudely perhaps, but nevertheless to a greater extent than any other course we had ever given, to think, to investigate, to express himself; and because it did these things we believe that the course was a success.